

Mining Accidents A Tragic Portion Of Utah History

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The lingering cloud of gloom from the mine tragedy in Emery County has prompted occasional media mention of Utah's worst mining calamity which occurred 85 years ago near Scofield in neighboring Carbon County.

Old newspaper files tell the sad story. I'll recount a few glimpses from them which tug at the heart strings even after all these years. But first, a few statistics.

With 200 fatalities, the Scofield disaster of May 1, 1900 wasn't only Utah's worst — it was the biggest mining tragedy in the nation to that point in time. President William McKinley was moved to wire condolences and even France's President Loubet sent a message of sympathy.

Today, according to Bureau of Mines compilations published by World Almanac, Scofield ranks fifth among mine disasters in U.S. history, behind four later ones:

Monongah, W. Va., Dec. 6, 1907, 361 deaths; Dawson, N. M. Oct. 22, 1913, 263 deaths; Cherry, Ill., Nov. 13, 1909, 259 deaths; and Jacobs Creek, Pa., Dec. 19, 1907, 239 deaths. All involved bituminous coal mines.

Utah's second-worst mining tragedy — at the Castle Gate No. 2 mine in Carbon County March 8, 1924 — ranks 10th on the list of national mine disasters with 171 deaths.

It should be noted that the current Wilberg Mine tragedy, with the 27 victims still entombed, is the nation's worst since 91 silver miners were killed in a May 2, 1972 underground fire at the Sunshine Mine at Kellogg, Idaho.

The Scofield disaster of 1900 occurred in the Winter Quarters Mine of the Pleasant Valley Coal Co. Activity in the mine at that particular time was greatly accelerated by a contract for 2,000 tons of coal per day.

The cause of the tragedy never was officially established. However, news accounts said it was "reasonably certain" a dynamite explosion ignited coal dust in the air (the miners worked in ankle-deep dust in some places), and that like "oiled lightning," the explosion swept through the mine and burned up the oxygen. The victims were asphyxiated as they breathed the poisonous "after-damp."

The drama and pathos at the scene were reflected in news accounts. Widows and children gathered outside the mine and rushed forward as bodies were brought out by stretcher. Pathetic cries went up as each victim was identified.

Bodies were laid out in company buildings, boarding houses, the chapel, and the school house in the mining town. About 105 widows visited the place; there were 270 fatherless children.

Caskets were shipped in by



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carload. The supply in Utah ran short and some had to be ordered from Denver.

A tearful mass memorial service was held at Scofield May 7, 1900. Three Mormon apostles — George Teasdale, Heber J. Grant and Reed Smoot — offered words of hope and consolation. Many individual funerals also were held.

Governor Heber M. Wells appealed for aid for the stricken families. In Provo, Mayor Thomas N. Taylor appointed Jesse Knight, Reed Smoot, Judge Dusenberry, Sheriff Storrs, Myron Newell and himself as a committee to visit Scofield and determine how Provo could best help.

Taylor also named C. E. Loose chairman of a finance committee. About \$5,000 was raised immediately, with Loose and Knight each giving \$1,000.

Let's conclude with a few touching sidelights of the catastrophe, related in newspaper coverage:

Eight from one family perished — Robert Hunter, 3 sons and 4 nephews.

John Muir died almost side by side with his two sons.

John James and his son were found with arms tightly clasped about each other in a death embrace.

Some victims were from Utah County, including W. P. Dougall of Springville, a graduate in civil engineering.

Deaths included about 20 youths employed with their fathers as "trap boys."

As soon as entry into the mine was permitted after the explosion, young Will Clark rushed inside hoping to find his father, but lost his own life as the "lurking damp" enveloped him. That tragedy was compounded further when Will's sister Lizzie, 16, collapsed and died at her mother's feet when informed of Will's death.

A reporter who related the story was moved to write: "What words are left to picture the agony of Mrs. Clark? In the twinkling of an eye almost, she has seen her husband, son and daughter stricken down."